

Sly Flourish's
DUNGEON MASTER TIPS



BY MICHAEL E. SHEA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JARED VON HINDMAN

Sly Flourish's

Dungeon Master Tips

by Michael E. Shea

Copyright © 2010 by Michael E. Shea

<http://mikeshea.net/about>

Cover and interior art Copyright © 2010 by Jared von Hindman

<http://headinjurytheater.com>

Visit <http://SlyFlourish.com> for D&D 4e Dungeon Master Tips

Visit <http://twitter.com/slyflourish> for daily D&D DM tip tweets

First Printing July 2010

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Compatibility Logo, D&D, PLAYER'S HANDBOOK, PLAYER'S HANDBOOK 2, DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE, MONSTER MANUAL, MONSTER MANUAL 2, and ADVENTURER'S VAULT are trademarks of Wizards of the Coast in the USA and other countries and are used with permission. Certain materials, including 4E References in this publication, D&D core rules mechanics, and all D&D characters and their distinctive likenesses, are property of Wizards of the Coast, and are used with permission under the Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition Game System License. All 4E References are listed in the 4E System Reference Document, available at www.wizards.com/d20.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS 4th Edition PLAYER'S HANDBOOK, written by Rob Heinsoo, Andy Collins, and James Wyatt; DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE, written by James Wyatt; and MONSTER MANUAL, written by Mike Mearls, Stephen Schubert and James Wyatt; PLAYER'S HANDBOOK 2, written by Jeremy Crawford, Mike Mearls, and James Wyatt; MONSTER MANUAL 2, written by Rob Heinsoo, and Chris Sims; Adventurer's Vault, written by Logan Bonner, Eytan Bernstein, and Chris Sims. © 2008, 2009 Wizards of the Coast. All rights reserved.

Contents

How to Use This Book.....	5
Build Your Story.....	8
Focus on Your Next Adventure.....	9
Review the Adventure Checklist.....	12
Maintain Creativity	17
Tell Organic Stories.....	20
Create Awesome Villains.....	22
Avoid Story Pitfalls.....	24
Design Fun Encounters.....	27
Use an Encounter Checklist.....	28
Balance Challenge and Fun.....	30
Build Exciting Battle Maps.....	32
Make Environments Enjoyable.....	37
Use Minions Effectively	40
Improve Solo Creatures.....	44
Design for Fast Combat.....	47
Optimize Your Monsters.....	49
Avoid Encounter Pitfalls.....	51
Run a Great Game.....	54
Use Props and Handouts.....	55
Keep Your Players' Attention.....	57
Manage Time at Your Table.....	59
Run Exciting Skill Challenges.....	63
Get Your Players to Roleplay.....	65
Use Cheap Table Tools.....	67
Use Effective and Entertaining House Rules.....	69
Tap Into the D&D Hive Mind.....	71
Acknowledgments.....	72
References.....	74
About the Author.....	75
About the Artist.....	76

How to Use This Book

I wrote this book to help you run awesome Dungeons and Dragons games. I wrote it assuming you've read both of the Dungeon Master Guides and have run a few games yourself.

This is a short book on purpose. It is designed to be readable in a couple of hours, even skim read in a few minutes. It is designed to act as a reference, offering checklists for designing your adventures, encounters, and battle maps. It is split into three sections: building your story, designing fun encounters, and running a great game. Throughout, you will find useful tools, tips, and advice you can use every time you prepare a game.

The first tip: If it doesn't fit, ignore it

In his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language", George Orwell offers a rule that you should keep ready when reading the tips in this book:

"Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

Part of being a great dungeon master is knowing which ideas and rules work well at your table and which do not. Consider all of the tips and advice in this book, but also consider whether this advice will work well for you and your group. Some tips may, some may not.

You will find few original ideas in this book. In the age of the web, we have access to a wealth of information and ideas that far outstretch what was available to us 30 years

ago. With the combined experience of the best dungeon masters in the world on the net, we can now solve problems quickly and easily that, until now, have vexed us for years.

With that in mind, I have many people to thank for the ideas in this book. Many of them are writers who have as much a passion for Dungeons and Dragons as I do. They make the game far greater than the published books themselves, offering tips, tricks, and techniques that make our games better every day.

At the end of this book, in the acknowledgments, you will find a list of those who helped create and build upon the ideas that made this book possible.

Now let's start making your game better.

Section 1:

Build Your Story

Focus on Your Next Adventure

The most important adventure you will ever run is your very next one.

It's easy to find yourself spending most of your preparation time building out the details of your campaign world. You build armies of non-playing characters with whom your players can interact. You outline 100 tiny political threads going on in your living world. You write up 10,000 years of history and 50 different story seeds for your players to investigate.

All of that matters little compared to the next adventure you plan to run. You may enjoy building out that world, filling it with geographical, historical, and political detail, but little of it will likely hit your game table. Don't worry about the details of your massive new campaign, worry about how you're going to entertain the five people coming to your house next Thursday night.

Focus your attention on the stories, scenes, encounters, and challenges of the next game you plan to run. Worry about the story as it progresses, week by week, instead of building out huge branching flowcharts. Worry about the very next decisions your players might make in the next game you're going to run.

This may seem counterintuitive. After all, shouldn't we spend our time carefully planning out our campaigns? Detailed campaign plans end up either falling apart as your game progresses or make your game too rigid as you constantly force your players back to the track you had laid out for them.

Write out your campaign's elevator pitch

Write out a single-sentence description of your campaign. What is your campaign's central theme? What is the main concept behind your game? What is the one driving force that will move your players forward? Don't complicate it with four or five main purposes. We all love open worlds but having a single driving force is what keeps people moving forward. Consider the following campaign elevator pitches:

The party must destroy the one ring of power before the ultimate evil force in the land takes control of it.

The party must destroy the demon prince that holds the entire fate of the universe in his hand.

The party must gather the forces required to wage war against an oncoming unstoppable force.

A single line campaign description is nearly all the planning you need to keep things moving in the right direction. From that seed, you can build 100 adventures that will last 3 years. All the while, your players will understand what it is they must do.

Use the 5x5 method

If you're not comfortable with a simple campaign elevator pitch and your wits to keep you building adventures, read up on Dave Chalker's 5x5 Method at <http://critical-hits.com/2009/06/02/the-5x5-method/>.

This is a simple method to build a rich, open world for your players to explore but still maintain enough structure to keep your game focused and give you a clear outline of adventures.

The process of the 5x5 method is simple. Begin with five central story lines that your campaign will follow. These should each sound like a campaign elevator pitch, big enough to keep your players busy but with a clear goal and direction.

For each of those five story lines, build out the five steps the party will take to get there. Each of these represents one to three game nights of adventures.

Finally, see how these different steps interconnect. What are the synergies that bring the entire campaign together? They don't all need these synergies, but a few will help your campaign feel cohesive.

Stay focused

Above all, stay focused on the things that are most important to your game. You may want to flesh out your final encounters to your big campaign but you would likely run a better game if you used that time to refine the battles that are coming up on your next game night.

Remember: Spend your time and energy on the game you're running next.

Section 2:

Design Fun Encounters

Make Environments Enjoyable

All too often it becomes easy for DMs to think like the antagonist of the story. We spend a lot of time in the minds of our villains, plotting our attacks and designing our devices of destruction.

Unfortunately, this might take us away from the true mindset we need to have — making the game enjoyable for our players. A good piece of that enjoyment comes from the challenge we provide but it also comes from the situations that let them enjoy their characters.

When designing an encounter environment, it isn't enough to build terrain elements that challenge the party. You will also want to add in terrain elements that make the terrain enjoyable for players.

Putting a holy altar that adds +1d6 radiant damage per tier is one such example. Another is the blood of an elder primordial that allows any creature standing upon it to critically hit on rolls of 19 and 20. Players are sure to seek out such areas and prevent their enemies from using them as well.

More difficult are terrain elements that your players will enjoy but without a clear benefit. Perhaps the ranger in your group prefers to climb up to high platforms to avoid dangerous melee opponents. Maybe your glaive-wielding fighter likes wide open spaces. Maybe your rogue likes areas of deep shadow.

These indirect methods can be ultimately more rewarding. Your players aren't sure you designed it just for them — they think they found a way to use the terrain that you didn't plan. Keep an eye and an ear out for the terrain your group enjoys the most.

Above all, remember that the encounter environment you build is for the fun of your players. Sometimes that means a real challenge, but other times it should mean they get to use the environment for their own, sometimes unexpected, benefit.

Section 3:

Run a Great Game

Keep Your Players' Attention

From time to time you will find yourself with a table full of players mostly staring at their smartphones or laptops while one player decides what to do. Consider your reaction to this carefully. You might think about banning electronics at your table or swatting their bluetooth headset out of their ears with a copy of your NPC baby name book. Instead, ask yourself if the electronics are to blame or are you simply not grabbing enough of their attention at the table? Instead of banning electronics, find ways to return their attention to the game.

Run two at a time

When a battle goes slowly, have two players run their turns at the same time. Have players pre-roll their attacks and damage to keep them focused on the battle rather than playing Plants vs. Zombies between rounds.

Ask for off-turn skill checks

Ask players to perform skill checks like history, nature, religion, perception, insight, and dungeoneering off of their turn to observe some detail of the encounter they haven't yet uncovered. Let players perform insight checks on their foes off of their turn while someone else is going through their round. When you see a player drifting away from the game, draw them back by asking them to roll a skill check and reveal a bit of information the group didn't have before.

Use the buddy system

Before the game begins, assign each player a buddy with whom they can discuss tactics. When one of these players begins to drift, the other can bring them back to the game by discussing their plans. Off-turn table strategy between two players takes far less time than a full table of players discussing strategies during the current round.

When creating the buddy system, consider carefully who goes with whom. Do the classes of the buddies fit well such as a defender and a leader? What about the personality types of the players? Two strategy-oriented players may not work as well as a strategic player and a kill-focused player. Make sure the personalities you put together in your buddy system make sense.

Assign a rules lawyer

Do you hear complaints about the rules lawyer at your gaming table? This player constantly quotes page and subsection on any possible question that comes up during the game. A designated rules lawyer, however, can be a great benefit as long as he or she remain objective. Be careful of the rules lawyer who constantly finds loopholes to support his or her own agenda.

An objective designated rules lawyer will spend more time paying attention to the game and will help other players figure out their possible options. The result is more attention spent on the game at hand and less updating Facebook or sending tweets.

Keeping all of your players in the game can be a difficult thing to do. Don't beat yourself up if you see them drifting and don't chastise them for it either. Instead of yelling about how Blackberries are destroying cohesive thought, find ways to draw them back into the game. Make it interesting for them to return and they will indeed return.

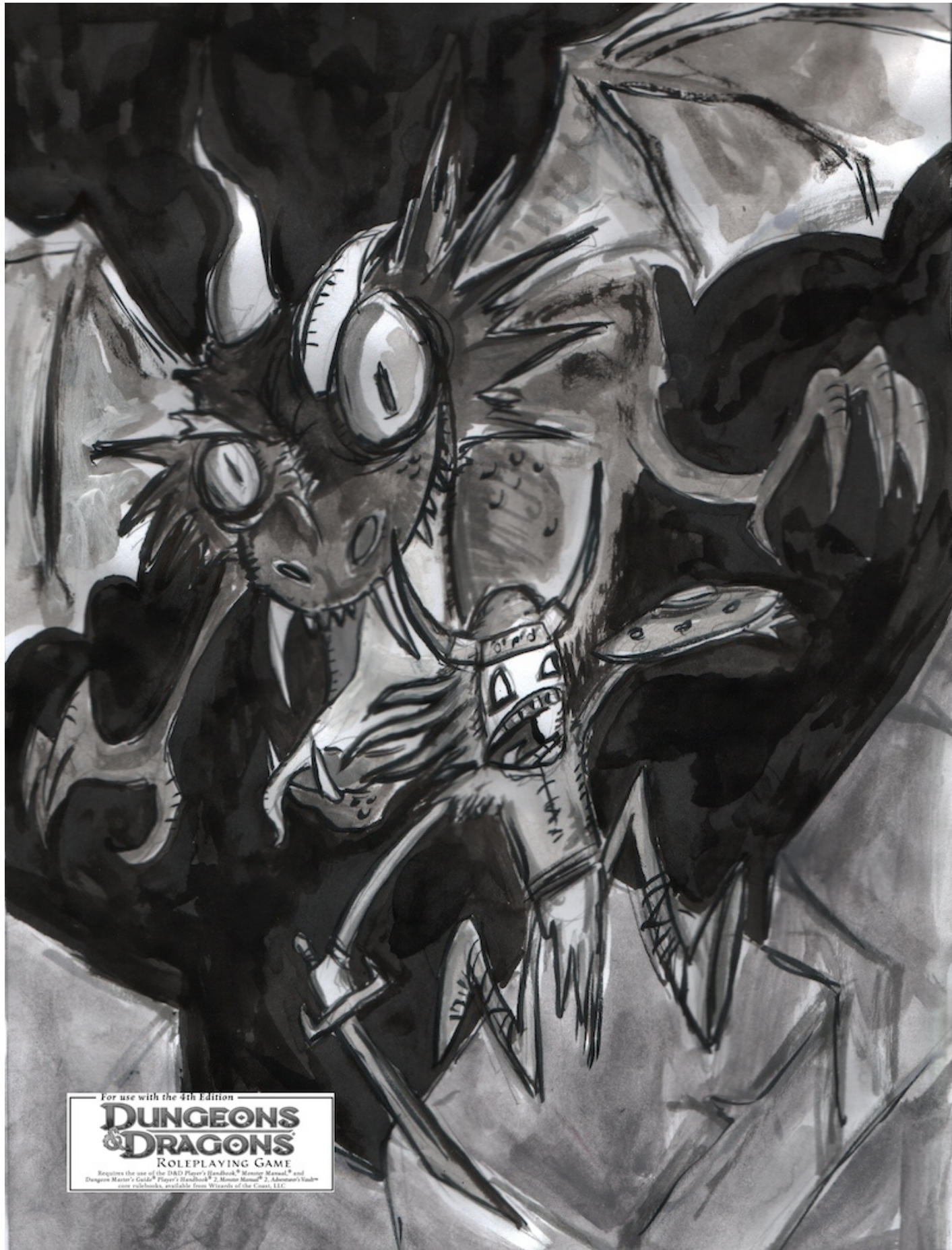
About the Author

Michael E. Shea is a writer, technologist, and webmaster born in Chicago, IL. Mike has played Dungeons and Dragons since 2nd edition in the 1980s and continues to play D&D weekly at his home. Mike is the creator and writer for <http://slyflourish.com>, a writer for <http://critical-hits.com>, and a regular guest on the podcast <http://thetomeshow.com>. He also writes daily DM tips at <http://twitter.com/slyflourish>.

Mike lives in Vienna, Virginia with his wife, Michelle, and his fiendish dire-worg, Jebu.

About the Artist

Jared von Hindman is an artist and sometime comedian who “dug too deep” while researching Stupid Monsters of Dungeons & Dragons. He awoke something Dire and horrible (perhaps Fiendish, even) and now he spends his days playing with plastic elves and illustrating new and creative ways to kill goblins. Currently he resides in Berlin with an older woman and a snake named Slinky. He’s not sure why his pet needs to be included in his bio, but all the cool kids seem to be doing it and Jared’s a sucker for peer pressure.



For use with the 4th Edition

**DUNGEONS
& DRAGONS**
ROLEPLAYING GAME

Requires the use of the D&D Player's Handbook® Monster Manual®, and
Dungeon Master's Guide® Player's Handbook® 2, Monster Manual® 2, Adventure's Vault®
core rulebooks, available from Wizards of the Coast, LLC.